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Bringing It All Back Home

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1920-29

Bringing It All Back Home

SALISBURY HOUSE | **DES MOINES** | **BOYD & MOORE AND RASMUSSEN & WAYLAND**
1928

A blend of English antiquity with the conveniences of American living, in its combination of informality and prestige and in its appropriateness for high-society living, the Weeks mansion epitomizes the English Manor House style so popular in the 1920s.

In the early 1920s, Carl Weeks, who had amassed a fortune in the cosmetics industry, traveled with his wife, Edith, to Salisbury, England. There they visited the "King's House," an agglomeration of edifices erected and enlarged as royal residence in the 13th, 15th, and 17th centuries. Like many wealthy Americans journeying abroad at this time, the Weeks were tremendously impressed by antiquity, by sovereign life, and by a certain dimension of depth and authenticity that came from centuries of age. If America basked in mechanization, in factory production, in fulfilling the functional, England must have seemed the opposite. To Americans, Cambridge and Oxford appeared as font of intellectual endeavor, an appearance that gave rise to architectural styles—Collegiate Gothic and Collegiate Tudor—inordinately popular with American campus designers. In King's House, the Weeks found both Gothic and Tudor blended together as one, with a 17th Century 'King Charles brick portion' adding variety to the mix. But how to take it home? A national treasure in England, the King's House was not for sale.

Returning to Des Moines, the Weeks set about replicating what they had seen in the Old World. In the twenties, period revival houses and particularly the

English Manor House achieved enormous popularity with a moneyed gentry in America who, thanks to automobile transportation, retreated to the exclusivity of "green belt" suburban acreage. Salisbury House was to be the king of Old English manor houses. Built for three million dollars between 1923 and 1928 on a 10-acre site of virgin woodlands in Des Moines just off 42nd Street and south of Grand, this 42-room mansion was designed initially by the Des Moines firm of Boyd and Moore. Later, the New York architect William Whitney Rasmussen was consulted and it was his revised design that ultimately was executed.

True to medieval aesthetics, the house rambles across its site, anchored by the centrality of its three-story great hall facing south. Cloaked in flint and limestone and with a single, cathedral-sized window, the entry hall interior features walls of limestone block, a mezzanine of medieval wood, and trusses and rafters taken from England's White Heart Inn as it was being dismantled. Awkward proportions and a rather stark and dark cubic volume are tempered by tapestry, a variety of paintings, carved balustrade figures, various carpets and cabinetry, and a view into the again antique stair hall. Indeed, the re-use of building parts—paneling and fragments

Left: "Indian Room" on the lower level, directly beneath the living room. Exposed brick walls feature string course of antique clay roof tiles broken during shipping. Custom cattle-skull sconces and decorative ceiling fixtures help "thematize" the room which features selections of rugs, weavings, and accoutrements from the Weeks' travels in the American Southwest.

Right: Library, with floor-to-ceiling shelving, beamed and panelled ceiling, and medieval hearth.



1920

> 19th Constitutional Amendment granting women the right to vote is ratified > First radio station begins regularly scheduled broadcasts

1921

> Irish Free State established > De Young museum opens in San Francisco, CA > The U.S. formally ends WWI > Insulin discovered at University of Toronto > Race Riot in Tulsa, OK > Death penalty abolished in Sweden

1922

> Mussolini's Fascists seize Italian government > First successful insulin treatment of diabetes > Egypt gains independence from UK > Lincoln Memorial dedicated in Washington, D.C. > Irish Civil War begins

1923

> Turkey becomes a republic > Frank Lloyd Wright's Textile block houses, Los Angeles, CA > First distribution of *Time* magazine > Interpol established > U.S. President Warren Harding dies, succeeded by Calvin Coolidge

1924

> Gerrit Rietveld's Schroeder house, Utrecht, Holland > Vladimir Lenin dies > Olympics open in Chamonix, France > IBM Corporation founded > First GMT time signals from Royal Greenwich Observatory > First Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade held in NYC



CAMERON CAMPBELL ©

Above: The south and principle elevation of Salisbury House with three-story flint and limestone entry hall and pointed-arch portal just right of center.

including clay roof tiles, ceilings, doors, mantels, stairs, and rafters—intended to lend authenticity to the house, has the opposite effect. Displaced in time and space and set in juxtaposition to other items similarly displaced, “antiquity” loses its authenticity. No matter how accommodating the medieval picturesque, integration eludes the mansion’s overall design. Instead, the house reads as a series of period rooms, the sort of thing found in the lower levels of American art museums across the country.

This being said, Salisbury House does have its moments and is well worth a visit. Its library, defined by walls of books and manuscripts on elegantly rustic shelving, conveys a sense of the importance of literature and of the kind of place that encouraged a literary mind. The “Indian Room,” an informal game room located directly beneath the vast living room, features walls of brick masonry laced with stringcourses of broken English antique roof tiles. These walls have about them a scale, color, and rusticity appropriate to the room’s

intention. The Weeks enjoyed traveling in the American Southwest and their collection of Native American artifacts and rugs once displayed in this room was a highlight of the house. Additionally, the Art Deco private bathrooms of Carl and Edith Weeks capture the luxuriousness of the Great Gatsby atmosphere that permeates this edifice. Though obviously functional, both baths are rich in color and pattern and employ wondrous fixtures and mirrors. Carl’s bath especially, with its vaulted ceiling of white and its walls of black tile, with the glitter of chrome and its beveled mirror, and with its porcelain fixtures fit for the Michelin Man, exudes the enthusiasm and energies not of times long past but of the contemporary, vibrant Roaring Twenties.

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1925

> F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*
> First publication of the *New Yorker*
> Albania declares itself a republic > The first synchronized transmission of pictures and sound achieved by Charles Francis Jenkins > Adolf Hitler publishes his personal manifesto *Mein Kampf*

1926

> Walter Gropius’ Bauhaus at Dessau
> Adolf Loos’ Josephine Baker House, Paris, and Tristan Tzara House > Paris Gertrude Ederle becomes the first woman to swim the English Channel
> Afghanistan declares monarchy
> Lebanon becomes a republic

1927

> Chiang Kai-shek unites China > The Great Mississippi River Flood greatest national disaster in U.S. history > Harold Stephen Black invents the feedback amplifier > The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the “Academy” in “Academy Awards,” is founded

1928

> First regularly scheduled TV broadcasts in U.S. > Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, at Poissy, France > An iron lung respirator is used for the first time at Children’s Hospital, Boston, MA > Michinomiya Hirohito is crowned the 124th Emperor of Japan

1929

> Stock market crash in U.S., worldwide depression > Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion > Mies van der Rohe’s Tugendhat House, Brno, Czechoslovakia
> James Joyce, *Ulysses*